

Hazards of butterfly collecting: Father Theodor Maessen, London and Florida, 1993

I had a series of long and animated telephone conversations with Father Theodor Maessen during 1993. He was the village priest in an obscure part of Germany, which I never even managed to locate on a map. This was at the beginning of my research project on the Butterflies of West Africa. The purpose of the conversations was not the religious sentiment of obscure Germans, but the butterflies of Ghana. For, during a period stretching from the early 1950s to the mid 1970s, Father Maessen had made what is possibly the most complete collection of butterflies ever made single-handedly in a West African – or any African – country. And did he do well: The following species and subspecies bear his names, and there are other new ones that do not carry his name: *Papilio maesseni* Berger, 1974 (now *P. nobicea* Suffert, 1904), *Telipna maesseni* Stempffer, 1970, *Mimacraea maesseni* Libert, 2000, *Eresina maesseni* Stempffer, 1956, *Eresina theodori* Stempffer, 1956, *Cephetola maesseni* Libert, 1999, *Iolaus parasilanus maesseni* Stempffer & Bennett, 1958, *Iolaus theodori* Stempffer, 1970, *Bicyclus maesseni* Condamin, 1971, *Celaenorhinus proxima maesseni* Berger, 1976, *Ceratrachia maesseni* Miller, 1971, *Paracleros maesseni* Berger, 1978, and *Fresna maesseni* Miller, 1971. So many are named after him that we decided it was better to commemorate him with *Iolaus likpe* Collins & Larsen, 2004 – named after village where he spent most of his time in Ghana.

Maessen would probably have been allowed to soldier on in Ghana for the rest of his life, but he decided to go back to Europe. Though Dutch, he had to settle for a parish in Germany. His reason for going back was simple: “Our church in Ghana could manage on its own. I did not feel I could justify the expenses to the church of staying ... and I might have stood in the way of some up-and-coming Ghanaian priest.” A most admirable sentiment.

He lived all his time in Ghana’s Volta Region, which is biogeographically interesting, since it occupies a special niche. West of the river Volta the fauna is wholly West African, but the Volta Region on the east has several endemic species as well as contact with the Nigerian fauna. Thus, *Telipna maesseni* is endemic to the Volta Region, while *Mimacraea maesseni* is found in the Volta Region as well as in western Nigeria. Several other butterflies extend from the main central African rainforests to western Nigeria and then to the Volta Region, without crossing the Volta River – and this despite the fact the a tongue of savannah country without rainforest (the Dahomey Gap) now separates the two areas. That the Volta River can be a true biogeographical boundary is actually rather remarkable. Before it was made into a huge lake by the Akosombo Dam it was not that much of a river.

Maessen’s collection of immaculately preserved specimens – mostly set while still fresh – went to the Allyn Museum in Sarasota, Florida. The bulk is from the Volta Region, but he obviously made a point of visiting colleagues in obscure corners of Ghana, and collected assiduously there as well. This unpublished cornucopia I obviously had to study in detail, so I went there on one of my first trips during the



project. My next trip – enthusiastically endorsed by Father Maessen – was to be a visit to him. I had a splendid time in Sarasota. The Maessen collection was immaculately curated and easily accessible. The curators, Jacqui and Lee Miller, looked after me in the best possible way. The raw framework of my book began receiving a lot of real data – and lots of questions for my trip to Germany to debrief with Maessen. I then went on a trip to Ghana, partly to familiarize myself with the Volta Region.

On my return I phoned Maessen to schedule my trip to Germany. The phone was answered by a lady with a strong regional accent, difficult to understand, and sounding rather out-of-sorts. It was the housekeeper. Maessen had died two days earlier. So we were never to meet and I could not tap his unrivalled field knowledge, which would really have benefited my West Africa book. Some notes he sent me, together

with the telephone conversations, gave me only an inkling of the information he held in his head.

One interesting feature emerged when studying his collection in Florida. At various times, he threw his energy into certain groups. Vast numbers of *Mylothris* were collected and bred, obviously at the instigation of L. Berger. *Goryra* skippers were suddenly collected in bulk at the request of L. Miller. And H. Stempffer kindled a deeper interest in the Lycaenidae, leading to the breeding of *Iolais*-species in the garden at Likpe. *Iolais theodori* is still known only from there.

I was at Wli Falls a few years ago, a lovely waterfall! near his Likpe residence, and one of his favourite spots. The water actually spills into Ghana from Togo, the frontier running along the crest of the ridge at the top of the falls (see inset photo). Butterflies still abound and the sliver of forest that borders the river below the falls is now the Agamatsu National Park. On the way back down the river I ran into two young men. “The good father used to do this”, they said. They told me how he used to take his two dogs walking there – and then complained about their interference with collecting! They had been in their teens at the time and had the fondest of memories of a good man. It was with sadness I had to tell them he was dead.—
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